

Distance Learning Lets Students See Israel Up Close

by RYAN TOROK, Staff Writer

Semadar Goldstein is teaching a lesson about an “Israel moment” to ninth-graders during a Jewish studies class at Shalhevet School in Los Angeles. She talks about how she got on a bus in Jerusalem without any money, only to have the driver pay her fare and wave for her to sit down, suggesting she pay him back later. In the United States, she says, the driver would likely have shooed her off the bus.

teachers for schools and communities that didn’t have access to high-quality Jewish day school educators,” said Esther Feldman, information technology director for the Lookstein Center. “But it grew from that. It brings Israel to life.”

Fifteen North American Jewish day schools currently participate in the program, including Shalhevet, a Modern Orthodox high school, and Tarbut V’Tora Commu-



Jerusalem-based teacher Semadar Goldstein leads a lesson on army insubordination, which included a video conference with a former IDF sergeant, for students at Shalhevet. Photo courtesy Semadar Goldstein

Goldstein has the students’ rapt attention, but she isn’t in the classroom. In fact, she’s more than 7,500 miles away.

A computer in the corner of the room projects Goldstein’s image, via two-way video conferencing from Jerusalem, onto the classroom’s whiteboard. A camera and microphones mounted above the whiteboard allows Goldstein to interact with the students.

“It’s a lot different than any other class,” said Hannah-Leeba Ellenhorn, a student in the distance-learning class at Shalhevet. “Kids in the hallway peep their heads in our classroom — it’s so cool that [the teacher is] so far away and yet teaches us about things that happen in Israel.”

While many Jewish day schools in Los Angeles promote Israel awareness, either through exchange programs or online learning, the Remote Teacher Program, established by the Lookstein Center for Jewish Education at Bar-Ilan University, brings Israel-based teachers into day school classrooms to teach yearlong courses.

The program, which is currently in its sixth year, “began as a way to find excellent

nity Day School, a nondenominational K-12 day school in Irvine.

Rabbi Ari Leubitz, Shalhevet’s Judaic studies principal, says the aim of the Lookstein program, which the school has used for two years, gels with goals he has for the students.

“Part of our mission or goal is to promote Israel awareness and Israel culture,” he said. “Our kids are able to really understand what’s going on on a day-to-day, weekly basis in Israel” because of this program.

The Shalhevet class, titled “Contemporary Jewish Issues,” is taught during the school’s first period, starting at 7:50 a.m. For Goldstein, the time difference means she’s starting at 5:50 p.m.

Offering a variety of classes, including Tanakh, prayer, comparative Jewish and American law, Jewish identity and Israel studies, the Lookstein Center provides instruction for grades 4-12 and works with faculty at the day schools to create the curriculum.

“The Lookstein Center in no way feels they’re an expert in what every school

▶ ▶ ▶ 34

Distance Learning

◀ ◀ ◀ 26

needs," Feldman said. "At [the Epstein Hebrew Academy in] St. Louis, they don't have a teacher to teach Hebrew for all the students, so that we provide."

Diaspora schools like Shalhevet and Tarbut V'Torah pay a fee to participate in the Remote Teacher Program, which the Avi Chai Foundation currently subsidizes. Joseph Hakimi-Maghen, Tarbut V'Torah's Judaic studies instructor, says his school pays a subsidized rate of \$2,000 for a class over one year. Compared with the average salary for a

day school teacher — \$65,000 to \$75,000, according to BJE, formerly the Bureau of Jewish Education — it's easy to understand the appeal for a day school administrator.

Lookstein Center's Feldman said the goal is for the program to become self-sustaining, without subsidies — an achievable goal, she said.

Lessons in the distance learning classes often focus on polarizing topics. During a recent class, Goldstein held a lesson on army insubordination, conducting a three-way videoconference with a former Israel Defense Forces sergeant. She said the students become engaged if a subject is as "controversial as possible," and Web-based learning keeps them more focused.

The students interact with the lesson on multiple levels: visual, audible and tactile, said Yossie Frankel, Shalhevet's academic technology director.

"We've created an ADD [attention deficit disorder] environment for our kids," Frankel said. "It has to be constantly flipping and changing in order to stimulate our generation of learners."

Goldstein, who grew up in Los Angeles and lived in the United States until she was 26, was the first teacher to hold remote classes through the Lookstein Center. From her home in Jerusalem, she has taught students all over the United States and in Canada, an appealing aspect of her job, she said.

"I am able to boast about the wonders and joys of living in Israel on a daily basis — and it is wonderful," she said.

And while the schools are also required to provide an in-class assistant, Goldstein does admit there are downsides to teaching students from thousands of miles away.

"It is often frustrating not to walk around the classroom, lean over students' shoulders to help them with their work or look right into their eyes and communicate in a normal face-to-face encounter," she said.

"There are certain handicaps that go hand in hand with distance learning," she continued. "They are surmountable, but they're there."●